

## Strange Creatures

by Kristine Kathryn Rusch

Dan Retsler sat on the hull of a half-submerged boat, the mud thick around his thigh-high fishing waders. In his right hand, he held an industrial quality flashlight; in his left a pocket knife. He was filthy and wet and exhausted. Night was coming and there was still hours of work to do, buildings to search, items to move. He had managed to send the warning out early enough to evacuate most of the homes along the river, but the destruction was still heart-rending, the loss almost unimaginable.

The trailers were the worst. The water had knocked them about like Tonka Toys, ripping them in half, crushing them, scattering them all over the low-lying valley as if they weighed little more than matchsticks.

They were worth about that much now.

He ran a hand through his hair, feeling the thick silt that seemed to have become a part of him. The foul stench of the mud might never come out of his nostrils.

The river looked so tame now, a narrow trickle through the valley. He had seen the Dee flood before: once after a particularly wet December, and during the 1996 February storms, dubbed The Storm of the Century by commentators who felt it was pretty safe to apply that label when the century was nearly done. But he had never seen anything like this, so sudden, so furious, and so severe.

The Dee was a tidal river which opened into Hoover Bay just south of Whale Rock. High tides and too much rain often caused the Dee to flood her banks, but the floods were low and fairly predictable. Until 1996, no water had ever touched the trailer park, dubbed Hoover Village by some wag, and until that morning, had never touched the highway winding its way along the valley and into the Coastal Mountain Range.

The sun was going down, turning the sky a brilliant orange and red, with shades of deep blue where the clouds appeared. The Pacific reflected the colors. Retsler stared at it, knowing that any other day, he would have stopped, appreciated the beautiful sunset, and called someone else's attention to it.

A hand touched his shoulder. He looked up, saw the coroner, Hamilton Denne, standing beside him. Denne had a streak of river mud on the left side of his face, and his blond hair was spiked with dirt. His silk suit had splotches and watermarks, and his Gucci loafers were ruined.

Denne's wife would probably have a fit -- she came from one of Oregon's richest families, and despised the fact that Denne still insisted on doing his job even though they didn't need the money. If anyone asked her what Denne did, she would tell them he was a doctor, or if they pushed, a pathologist. She never admitted to the fact that he worked best with corpses. He was able to keep the secret because the coroner's position was an appointed one in Seavy County, and no one ever printed his name in the papers.

In his left hand, Denne balanced a clean MacDonald's bag and a cardboard tray with two styrofoam cups of coffee. He nodded toward the sunset. "This looks like the best seat in the house. Mind if I share it? I'll pay my way with food."

Retsler didn't reply. Any other time, he would have bantered back, said something about bribing a public official, or teased Denne about whether or not he could have afforded the food. But Retsler didn't feel like banter. He didn't feel like company either, although he didn't say so.

Denne handed him the coffee tray, then sat beside him. Retsler took out a cup and wrapped his hand

around it, letting the warmth sink through him.

"Didn't know what you liked, so I got everything," Denne said. "Whopper, Fish something or other, Biggie Fry -- "

"Whopper's from Burger King," Retsler said.

"Well, you know me," Denne said. "It was my first time at a drive-through window. The wonders of technology."

Retsler was too exhausted to smile. He knew it wasn't Denne's first time in a fast-food joint, since he'd dragged Denne to them countless times. Denne always protested, and then ate like a thirteen year-old at a basketball game.

Denne was holding the bag open. Retsler reached inside, and pulled out a Big Mac and fries. The smell of grease and sugar made his stomach cramp, but he knew he had to eat. He pulled the wrapper back and took a bite, tasting mustard, catsup, pickles and mayonnaise long before he got to the meat.

With the lining of his silk suit, Denne wiped mud off the boat's aluminum hull. Then he set the bag down, and rooted inside of it, pulling out a Filet O Fish. Denne had a penchant for the things, which Retsler always found odd, considering they lived in a place where they could get the freshest fish in the world.

"At the Club," Denne said, peeling the wrapper from his fish sandwich. He was referring to the Club at Glen Ellyn Cove, Whale Rock's gated community. "They have old maps of this coastline, some dating from the turn of the century. The last century."

Half of Retsler's Big Mac was gone. He was hungrier than he thought. He took a sip of coffee, waiting for Denne to finish. It was always easier to ignore Denne when the man was talking.

"Up until 1925 or so, this river wasn't the Dee at all. It was the Devil's River."

That didn't surprise Retsler. The Devil, in his opinion, had once dwelt on the Oregon Coast, eventually leaving behind his Punchbowl, his Churn, and oddly, his Elbow.

"When folks decided they wanted to bring tourism into Whale Rock, they shortened the name of the river." Denne took a bit of the sandwich and talked while he chewed. "Know why it was called the Devil's River?"

"Sea monster?" Retsler said. The food must have helped him feel slightly better. He answered Denne this time.

"No," Denne said. "That's Lincoln City. Devil's Lake."

Retsler wadded up the sandwich wrapper, and shoved it in the bag. He sipped his coffee. It was black and burned. He drank it anyway.

"They called it Devil's River," Denne said, "because it flooded unexpectedly fourteen times between 1899 and 1919. On clear nights, they said, the river would rise and fill the valley until this place looked like a lake."

In the distance, cars swooshed across the Dee River bridge, oblivious to the destruction hundreds of feet below them. The sun was gone now, leaving traces of orange against the night sky.

"You're saying this is not my fault," Retsler said.

"Acts of God happen," Denne said.

Retsler drained the styrofoam cup. "You don't believe that."

"Of course I do."

Retsler turned to him. "Hamilton, you and I've seen some strange things in Whale Rock."

Denne's eyes were hidden by the growing darkness. "It was a freak storm."

"You've never lied to me before, Hamilton. Don't start now." Retsler stood, grabbed his flashlight, and flicked it on. The beam made the mud glisten. "Thanks for the comfort food."

Denne had his elbows on his knees, his right hand holding the cup from the lip. "Dan," he said. "You didn't start this thing."

Retsler paused, wondering why that didn't make him feel better. Then he said, "And I didn't end it, either."

\* \* \* \*

It began a few days earlier, on the first day of the new year. Retsler answered the call about a suspicious smell on the beach.

The woman who had obviously made the call sat in the loose sand near the concrete cinderblocks lining the beach access. Her black hair flowed down her back. The constant ocean breeze stirred a few strands, but she didn't seem to notice. Her legs were spread in front of her, her toes buried in the sand. She wore a light jacket despite the day's chill. Retsler had a sense that she had been crying, but she wasn't now. Instead, she was staring out to sea, as if the frothy brown surface -- filled with dirt from the rainstorms of the last few days -- held the answers to questions he hadn't even heard yet.

Retsler stood on the concrete slab above the beach access and watched her for a moment. She didn't seem to know she was being observed. Cool mist pelted his face. The moisture felt good. He hadn't gotten much sleep last night: fifteen drunk and disorderlies; dozens of drunk driving stops; illegal fireworks on the beach. By the time he had turned in, about four a.m., he was praying that the Y2K bug would hit on Christmas so that no one could travel to the coast for New Year's Eve. Vain hope, he knew, but it was the only one he had.

He walked down the sand-covered ramp. Driftwood littered the beach, a testament to the rough surf of the last month. The air stank of charred wood and something else, something he didn't want to think about.

When he reached her, he crouched. "Maria Selvado?"

She raised luminous brown eyes to his. Her eyes were so dark they seemed to have no pupils. The whites were stunningly clear. There was moisture on her lower lashes, but he couldn't tell if it was from the mist or from tears. "Yes?"

"I'm Dan Retsler. I'm the chief of police here in Whale Rock." As if that meant something. He ran a department of ten, double what they'd had two years ago. Whale Rock was big enough to keep them busy, but not big enough to pay the salaries of more officers.

"Thanks for coming. I didn't know who to call."

Probably Fish and Game, he thought. Or the State Department of Natural Resources. Half a dozen agencies probably had jurisdiction over this one.

"Where?"

She waved a hand toward the surf. "That one."

He followed her gaze. The remains of a bonfire, piled high on a dune. He swallowed hard, thankful that he hadn't partied the night before, and stood.

The stench was intermittent, whenever the breeze happened to blow in his direction. Otherwise, he smelled only the salty ocean freshness and knew it could lull him into thinking nothing was wrong.

He slogged through deep sand as he walked up the dune, then crossed to a driftwood log the color of long abandoned houses. On the other side of the log was a pile of charred wood half covered in sand, and about two dozen beer cans, scattered in a semi circle. The odor was strong here, and mixed with the smell of Budweiser and old vomit.

The carcass lay half in the fire, flesh burned and bubbled, but still recognizable by shape: a seal pup, skinned. Bile rose in his throat and he swallowed it down, reminding himself that he had seen worse and not too long ago: the cats in the bag by the river, the dog the vet said had been tortured for days, the horse, still alive, and half crazed by knife wounds all along its flank.

Retsler had read the studies, been to schools, knew the psychiatric lingo. Serial killers started like this -- usually as teenagers, practicing on bigger or more difficult targets, needing a greater thrill each time to duplicate that same sick feeling of pleasure.

Seal pups. Jesus.

He looked away, stared at the ocean just as the woman had been doing. The sun peeked through a break in the clouds, falling on the white caps, adding a golden hue to the ocean's brown and blue surface. He reached into his pocket and pulled out his cell phone, flipping it open and hitting his speed dial.

After two rings, he got an answer. "Hamilton," he said, "sorry to disturb your holiday, but I've got something I need you to see."

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The woman chose to wait beside him. When he told her he could take her statement, if she wanted, and then she could go, she shook her head. She seemed to think her actions warranted an explanation because, after a few moments, she told him that she worked at the Hatfield Marine Science Center in Newport. Her specialty was seals.

Denne saved him from answering. Retsler heard the rumble of Denne's rusted Ford truck, the one he'd bought in November against his wife's wishes, because he was tired, he said, of showing up at crime scenes in his silver Mercedes. Not that there were that many murders in Seavy County, which was Denne's jurisdiction. But Denne had an eye for detail and a knowledge of the obscure that made him useful to all the police departments in the county. For a job that was supposed to be part-time, a job that should have taken very little of his precious social time, it seemed to be a major preoccupation for him, one that was growing more and more of late.

The door slammed and Denne made his way down the beach. Retsler led him to the carcass, and watched as Denne's face went white.

"This is how someone chose to ring in the New Year?" he asked.

Retsler stuck his hands in the back pockets of his jeans. "I want you to treat this like a human murder scene. And then we'll -- "

"Compare it to that dog, I know." Denne glanced at the ocean, then at the bonfire. "They wanted us to find this. It's above the high water line."

"Or maybe they were just careless," Retsler said. "That's a lot of beer."

"Looks like it was some party," Denne said. "I'll bet there're one or two people who aren't happy about how it ended."

"Thought of that," Retsler said.

"You know you'll have to call the State. These pups are protected. Hell, you could get slapped with a gigantic fine if you move a live one. I have no idea what happens if you kill one."

"It's the same thing," Retsler said. Tourists came across seal pups alone on the beach all the time, then picked "the poor things" up and hauled them to a vet, thinking they were orphans. The act of kindness always doomed the pup, whose mother had left it on the beach on purpose and would have been back for it. Very few pups were ever safely returned to the wild; most died after being separated from the mother.

"It's not quite the same," Denne said, and went to work.

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After he'd collected the beer cans and all the other evidence he could find, Retsler offered to drive Maria Selvado back to Newport, but she refused. She said she was staying in Whale Rock for her work. She had told him, as if it were more a threat than a promise, that she would drop in his office on Monday to find out how his work was progressing.

He had left Denne to the mess, and had driven back to the station. It was in the center of downtown, with a display window that overlooked Highway 101. The station had once been prime retail space, but Retsler's predecessor had demanded, and received, the building because, he said, most crimes were committed just outside its doors.

That was true enough. On most days, the police log was something Jay Leno might read as a joke: two people pulled over for running red lights; Slow Children sign vandalized (for the eighth time) on South Jetty Road; lost puppy found before Safeway store, identified and returned to owner.

It was the other days that were difficult: the spur-of-the-moment kidnapping outside the local Dairy Queen; the gang war, featuring rival gangs imported from Portland, on the Fourth of July; the drownings, search-and-rescue operations, all caused by the stupid things tourists did on the beach. If someone asked him how hard his job could get, those were the things he mentioned. He never brought up Whale Rock's secret side.

Denne was familiar with it, and Retsler's dispatch, Lucy Wexel, was a firm believer that there was some sort of vortex here that brought out the magic in the world. Retsler's introduction had come two years ago when intact and seemingly recently deceased bodies appeared on the beach, all from the same sixty-year-old shipwreck. Then there were the three so-called women who seduced people to their deaths in the sea; Retsler had seen them, and narrowly escaped. Denne called them mermaids, but they weren't. They were sirens, perhaps, or sea hags, and they were something Retsler never ever talked

about.

Eddie was working dispatch today, with Retsler on call. New Year's Eve was always a nightmare, but New Year's Day was usually as quiet as a church -- people were either too hungover or too tired to get out of the house. Even though the sun was peaking through the clouds, the beach was empty, something Retsler was grateful for.

Eddie was sitting with his feet on Lucy's desk, a *Car and Driver* magazine on his lap, and three Hershey's candy wrappers littering the floor around him. When Retsler entered, Eddie sat up, and immediately started cleaning.

"Sorry, boss. Didn't expect you."

Retsler waved a hand. "You're fine."

"Figure out what died on the beach?" Eddie, of course, had taken Selvado's call.

"Seal pup. Skinned and burned."

"Je-Zus." Eddie whistled, then shook his head. He'd seen a lot of the strange things around Whale Rock as well, but they never ceased to surprise him either. "What the hell would anyone do that for?"

"Kicks, it looks like." He took one of Eddie's candy bars. "Mind?"

Eddie shook his head.

"Do me a favor. Look through the files, see if you can find more animal killings, anything that predates that spate of them we had last year."

"You got it."

"And do a location map for me too, would you?"

"Sure." Eddie actually looked relieved. He was usually patrolling because he liked to be busy. He wasn't suited for dispatch.

Retsler went through the open door into his tiny office. He didn't pull the blinds on the glass windows -- another feature left over from the retail days -- but he sat hard at his desk. Incident reports from the night before littered the left corner. He stared at them for a moment, as if they were the enemy, then he frowned.

He might find something in them as well.

He slid them over to the center of his desk, and began to scan. He had to sign off on them anyway -- a departmental policy as old as Whale Rock and one he saw no need to change -- and he may as well do so now while he was waiting for Denne. Retsler had a few incident reports of his own to file from the night before, as well as the one this afternoon, but he wasn't ready to put anything down on paper.

Fifteen reports later, almost all of them drunk and disorderlies, almost all of them depressing in their sameness, Retsler stood and stretched his cramping hand.

"Hey!" Eddie said from the front. "Got something weird."

Retsler left his desk and walked to the dispatch area. Eddie had files scattered around him -- both of them would pay dearly for that when Lucy came in on Monday morning -- and at the center of it all, a

map of Whale Rock. There were multicolored dots all over the village. Retsler had forgotten how good Eddie was at details. Usually he didn't have to focus on them when he was on the street.

"I used red for this year," Eddie said. "I mean, last year. You know, '98. Green's for '97, and blue's for '96. I put the seal pup in last year's because the poor thing probably died before sundown."

"How do you figure?" Retsler asked.

"It takes a lot of work to skin an animal, don't care how good you are at it. It's harder if you can't see too good."

"They had a bonfire."

"And found a seal pup at night? I don't think so."

He had a good point. Retsler made a mental note of it. He leaned over the map and saw, while there were a few dots all over the city, the biggest concentration of them was around Hoover Bay.

"That's odd," Retsler said.

"That's what I thought," Eddie said, pointing to them. "And they're mostly from the last year or so. The rest're what you'd expect, and if I'd had time, I'd've marked 'em by month too. Outside the bay, most of the animals died between May and September."

"Tourists."

"Sicko, psycho kids, probably brought to the beach because there's nothing for them to tear up, or so the parents think."

That was one of the things Retsler hated the most about summer, the teenagers who invaded from other towns. After they saw the single movie playing at the Bijou, shopped at all the stores, and found out that the casino just outside of town really did enforce its 18 and above rule, they turned to vandalism or small acts of terror to take up their time.

"What about the others?" Retsler asked.

"Late '96, spaced about a month apart. Been escalating since October. That dog you found tied to the river piling was only two weeks ago, and the cats a week before that."

"You forgot the horse," Retsler said.

"Horse?"

"You know, Drayton's new mare, the one they'd bought their daughter for Christmas."

"Oh, yeah," Eddie said, and grimaced in distaste. "It's not down here as a killing."

"It should have been," Retsler said. "The vet had to put her down." The little girl had been heartbroken, and convinced, somehow, that it was her fault. The parents had promised her a new horse, but she had refused, saying she couldn't be sure it would be safe. The parents had looked at Retsler then, perhaps wanting him to reassure her, but he said nothing. He wasn't sure the family would be safe on hillside retreat, with its two-mile long road and 360 degree view of the ocean and the river. He'd thought the horse incident particularly cruel and had thought perhaps it had been directed at the Draytons.

Now he wasn't so sure. They lived awfully close to Hoover Bay, and a horse wasn't a dog or a seal pup.

Horses had an amazing amount of strength.

Had the horse been the killer's attempt to ratchet up the pleasure, only to be thwarted? Maybe that's why the killer went after something like a seal pup, something so helpless and vulnerable and cute that it would be easy to kill.

A shiver ran through Retsler. He didn't like what was loose in his little town.

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Denne showed up three hours later. He was wearing a Harvard sweatshirt over a pair of chinos. His deck shoes were mottled and ruined, and he wore no socks. Retsler had seen the outfit before. It was the one Denne kept at his office and used only when something at a crime scene made him leave his regular clothes behind.

Denne's blond hair was ruffled and his mouth a thin line. He pulled open the door, nodded to Eddie, and then came into Retsler's office without knocking.

Retsler had just finished going through the reports. Nothing from the area of the beach where they had found the seal pup. He would have expected something to come from the nearby hotels, perhaps, someone seeing the skinning of the pup or getting upset by the conduct of the beer drinkers. He was surprised no one had complained about the smell until that afternoon.

Denne sat in the chair before Retsler's desk. Even though he was wearing his grubbiest clothes, Denne's pants still had a crease, and even his sweatshirt looked pressed.

"If you can call two a pattern," Denne said without preamble. "We've got one."

"Looks like a different m.o. to me," Retsler said. He'd had all afternoon to think about it. "Dog tortured to death, left on a stake beneath the Dee River Bridge. Pup's skinned and burned on the beach. All those beer cans. I'm thinking a bunch of drunk kids got carried away -- "

"Whoever skinned that pup was an expert," Denne said. "The flesh was clean in the unburned areas. And the pup bled. It was alive, at least for part of it. But that isn't the clincher."

Retsler folded his hands over the report. He hadn't wanted to hear that the pup was alive. He hated some of the things this profession made him think about.

"The clincher is the knife itself. It's one of those thin serrated knives, made especially for that sort of work. Around here, folks usually use knives like that on deer or elk. It's got a slight nick in the blade. It leaves an identifiable mark. The dog and the pup had it. If I'd thought to keep those cats, I bet they'd have had it too."

Retsler sighed. Apparently Denne took that for disappointment because he added, "If I were dealing with human deaths here, I could make a case for a serial killer based on the knife evidence alone."

"What else have you got?"

"Some fibers. A pretty good print, in blood, on the body itself."

"Good," Retsler said. "That's a start. With that, and the cans, we might be able to find something."

"Hope so." Denne stood, then paused as if he had a thought. "There's one more thing. It may be nothing, or it might be everything."



"What?" Retsler asked.

"Did you find the pelt?"

Retsler shook his head. "I assumed it got burned."

"No. There was no fur in the fire at all, and they were too far from the water line for it to have been swept away with the tide."

"I'd better get someone to comb the beach, then," Retsler said.

"Yeah," Denne said. "But I don't think you'll find anything."

Retsler met his gaze. "You think our friend is selling the pelts?"

"Probably not. I have a hunch we're dealing with someone young here."

Retsler felt himself go cold. "Trophy hunter."

Denne nodded. "I suspected it with the dog, and I bet, if I looked at your report on the cats, I could find something too."

"The horse's mane," Retsler murmured.

"Hmm?"

"Nothing," Retsler said.

"If you don't find that pelt," Denne said, "I'd bet every dime I've got that our killer still has it."

"Should make it easier to convict someone."

"On what? Animal cruelty?" Denne said. "Seems minor for this kind of offense."

Retsler agreed, but felt the day's frustration fill him. "What am I supposed to charge him with? Prospective serial killing?"

"Wish you could," Denne said.

"We'll get the state involved," Retsler said. "Maybe they'll have ideas."

"They'll think we're a small town with too much time on our hands."

"Maybe they would have with the dog or the horse," Retsler said. "But we're dealing with a seal pup. That makes this TV news reporters sit up and beg."

"Think twice before you invite those vultures here," Denne said. "They'll mess up the entire case."

"I'll wait," Retsler said, "until I have something that'll stick."

Denne nodded. "I'll give you all the help I can."

Retsler smiled. "You've already given me plenty."

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The weekend wasn't as calm as Retsler would have liked. Two major traffic accidents on 101 backed

traffic for hours, and caused several more citations. A suspicious fire downtown in one of Whale Rocks failing seasonal businesses had Retsler calling in a state arson team. A Saturday night bar fight got out of control and spilled into the street, forcing Retsler to call his entire team to help quell the violence. He wasn't able to think about seal pups and animal mutilations until he arrived at work at 8 a.m. Monday morning, sleep deprived, bruised, and more thankful than he cared to admit that all the tourists had finally gone home.

Lucy was already at her desk, an unlit cigar in her mouth. She had curly gray hair and a military manner that her grandmotherly face somehow softened. Retsler had known her since he was a boy, and sometimes she still made him feel like that boy. He really didn't want to cross her.

She had two tall cups from Java Joes on her desk. As he passed, she handed him one. He turned to her in surprise. She had made it clear, when he became chief, that she didn't do windows or coffee.

"What's this for?"

"I figure you haven't gotten no rest since New Year's Eve. Caffeine won't cure it, but it'll cover it up."

He grinned at her. "You're a lifesaver, Lucy."

She frowned. "Don't go ruining my reputation."

"I won't tell a soul."

"Good," she said. Then she leaned back in her chair. "You got a woman in your office."

He glanced over, surprised he had missed it. Maria Selvado was sitting primly in the chair in front of his desk, a vinyl purse clutched to her white sweater. Her coat hung over the back of the chair, and she wore what appeared to be a very cheap pair of boots beneath her faded jeans.

"How long's she been here?"

"Half hour or so. I told her you don't normally come in until ten."

"Lucy!"

Lucy chuckled. "Well, I figured if you got in any earlier than ten, she'd think you were good at your job."

"I am good at my job."

"Just goes to show," Lucy said. Then she raised an eyebrow at him. "And if you let that Eddie dig in my files again, so help me God, I'll pour that coffee down your back."

"Yes, ma'am."

This time it was Retsler who chuckled as he headed to his office. Maria Selvado turned her face toward him. She looked even more exotic in the artificial light. "Chief," she said in greeting.

"Dan," he corrected.

She nodded. He sat behind his desk. She leaned forward, still clutching that purse. "I came for an update."

"I can't tell you much," he said. "We know that the pup's death is part of a pattern, and we are working on that angle. We have some leads -- "

"A pattern?" she murmured.

He stopped, frowning. She seemed disturbed by his words. "Yes. There have been other animals killed in the same area -- "

"But not other pups."

"Not that we know of."

She let out a small breath. The news seemed to relieve her. "But you have nothing on the killer."

"Not yet."

She raised those liquid eyes to his, and he thought he saw accusation in them. He parted his hands defensively, and then shook his head a little. He didn't have to defend himself to anyone.

But he did say, because he felt she needed to know, "We don't have much of a lab facility here. We've sent several items to the State Crime lab. We should hear later today."

She bit her lower lip. "You'll keep me informed."

"If I know where I can find you."

"I'm at the Sandcastle."

He shuddered. He couldn't help it. Someone bought the land a year ago, and in that time tore down the old hotel. The new one had the look of the old -- once one of the Coast's premiere resorts -- and people from all over the world had flocked to it in the last few days of the summer. But he had memories of the Sandcastle, memories of finding intact bodies before it, memories of unusual goings on that dated to his boyhood -- talk of ghosts and kelpies and strange creatures that emerged from the sea.

She looked amused. His reaction must have been visible. "They've remodeled," she said. "It's quite nice."

"I have no doubt."

She smiled and stood, her movements fluid and graceful. "Thank you for cooperating with me, Chief."

"You're welcome," he said, and waited for her to leave before he shut his office door.

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That night, Lucy chose the dinner spot and, as always, she picked the False Colors. It was a pirate-themed bar just off 101, but more locals went there than tourists. The sea chanties, played low, the fireplace that burned real wood, the ropes and life rings that came from real ships played to the out of towners, but most people who came to the coast brought their families. The skull and crossbones that decorated most corners, the human skulls on the mantel, the tales of death and murder framed on the walls were not the best atmosphere for children. So tourists usually came once and left, allowing the locals to enjoy the excellent food and the even better bar.

Retsler ordered his usual, a cutely named fish and chips entree that came with a large salad and a double order of bread. He got a Rogue Ale with that, and planned to get a huge dessert, thinking that the combination might allow him to go home and go to sleep at 9 p.m.

Lucy had the fisherman's platter, a meal three times the size of Retsler's, and he knew by the end of the evening, she would have eaten all of it. After a few minutes, Eddie joined them.

He was still in uniform, and as he sat down, June, the waitress scurried over. "You know Jeff don't like it when you guys come in your blues," she said in a half whisper.

"What's he going to do, call the cops?" Lucy asked and then smiled, a grandmother with fangs.

"It's just he doesn't think the presence of police adds to the atmosphere."

"He's afraid the real pirates will stop patronizing the place," Lucy said and chuckled.

"It's okay," Eddie said. "I won't do it again. It's just I had to talk to Dan and I didn't have time to change."

"Tell Jeff it's January 4th and the tourists went home, not that they're going to be in here anyway," Dan said. "And tell him he can chase his regulars away if he wants, but this is the slow season and it probably wouldn't be wise."

June bobbed her head. "It wasn't from me, you know. It's just that Jeff -- "

"Is delusional." Lucy picked up a crab leg and broke it in half. "We know."

June flushed. "You want something, Eddie?"

"Burger and fries and a diet."

June left and Eddie leaned forward. "I've got a couple of things on that seal pup killing," he said softly, even though there were no other patrons within hearing range. "Okay to tell you here?"

Sometimes Retsler frowned on discussing work at the False Colors. But that was usually in the summer, when the place was packed with first-timers who really didn't need tales of car crashes and children crushed by driftwood logs as an accompaniment to their meals.

Retsler picked up a fry. "Let's hear it."

Any news would be good news. Retsler expected a visit the next morning from Maria Selvado, and he hadn't heard from the crime lab yet. He supposed he could give her some information from Denne's autopsy of the pup, but even someone as involved as Selvado probably didn't want to hear about knife serrations and the fact that the pup had been skinned alive.

Retsler winced at the memory.

"You okay?" Eddie asked.

Retsler nodded. Then the main door opened, and Denne walked in. Retsler looked up. Denne's wife had expressly forbidden him from coming here. She had discovered, through small town gossip probably, that twice before he had shown up here to discuss a case, and had demanded that he not disgrace the family by showing his face in the False Colors again.

Yet there he was, in a charcoal-colored silk suit with a sterling silver pocket watch attached to a fob on the outside. His blond hair had been slicked back, and his aesthetic face looked almost haunted.

"She's pushing him too hard," Lucy murmured. "He's drifting over to the other side."

Retsler started, then considered the evidence: the truck, the clothes Denne had worn home on New Years, and now the appearance at the False Colors. Denne was abandoning his gated community for the peasants who ran this small town.

Eddie sighed. "You want to hear this or not?"

"Let's wait for Hamilton," Retsler said as he waved. Denne smiled -- he never quite grinned -- and walked down the worn stairs into the main dining area. As he did, he stopped June and ordered, then took the only empty chair at the table.

"Eddie," Retsler said, "was about to tell us news on our seal pup."

"Really?" Denne removed his suitcoat and hung it on the back of the chair.

Then he rolled up the sleeves of his white button-down shirt, revealing muscular forearms. With his left hand, he loosened his tie, and pulled it off. The entire group was watching him with astonishment. Retsler could feel his own mouth open in surprise.

Denne raised his eyebrows. "Don't let me stop you, Eddie."

"Um, yeah." Eddie shot Denne a slightly perplexed look, then said, "I been having conversations all day, casual ones, you know."

Retsler did know. One of the strengths of Whale Rock was its citizens' willingness to discuss anything if approached properly by someone they knew. A glance at the ocean, a mention of the dead pup, and a softly worded query about something related often got a glut of information.

"And I didn't get nothing on anyone selling pelts."

"I called fifteen different departments," Lucy said as she stabbed a scallop with her fork, "and no one in the entire State of Oregon has heard of anyone poaching seals."

"I asked her to. Hope you don't mind, boss," Eddie said.

A year ago, Eddie never would have taken that kind of initiative. "I gave you the legwork of the investigation," Retsler said. "You can divide it up how you want."

June brought a long neck for Eddie and an Alaskan Amber for Denne. Retsler looked at him in surprise, but Denne didn't seem to notice. Lucy did, however, and winked.

"Then what did you need to tell me?" Retsler asked when June left.

"You remember when they tore down the Sandcastle to make way for the new version?"

"A mistake if there ever was one," Denne said. "You do realize the hotel is on the beach."

They all looked at him. Building on the beaches -- on the sand -- was against the law in Oregon.

"How'd that happen?" Retsler said.

"You know the Planning Commission." Denne took a sip of the amber and looked like a man who had just had the most sublime experience of his life.

"It's a state law," Lucy said.

Denne raised his eyebrows. "The Sandcastle Hotel predates the law. The Commission claimed they couldn't do anything because it grandfathers in."

"How much did Roman Taylor pay them?" Retsler asked.

"Pay them? Kickbacks, in our small town? Impossible." Denne leaned back. "Just a sidebar. Didn't mean to derail you, Eddie."

Eddie grunted, and took a sip out of his long neck. "Anyway," he said, "when they were bulldozing the Sandcastle, they found an open area underneath it. There was all kinds of junk under there, old watches, gold coins, shiny stuff. Some of it wasn't worth much, but some of it was worth a lot, and Taylor said he got it, because he bought the property. Nobody fought him about it and nobody tried to trace it."

"And, not surprisingly, nobody thought to call us," Retsler said.

Eddie nodded, meeting his gaze. "Ain't it amazing how some things just don't make it to our attention until we can't do nothing about them."

"So what do the shiny things have to do with this investigation?" Lucy asked.

"Well, in there was a pile of fur, all sleek and shiny. Turns out it was seal pelts -- about twenty of them. Just beautiful things. I guess Taylor's the kind of guy who hangs deer heads on the walls and he was really excited about them pelts. He took them home."

Retsler whistled. "This was what? Last January?"

"Yep," Eddie said. "And that's not all. Various folks have come up asking for them seal pelts, even though the only people who knew about them were the digging crew and Taylor. Taylor won't talk to anybody about them."

"Curiouser and curiouser," Lucy said.

June set down Eddie's hamburger, and placed a double cheeseburger -- an item the False Colors proudly called its Gut Blaster -- in front of Denne. Retsler couldn't resist.

"Your wife isn't going to be too happy when you come home smelling of hot sauce, jalapenyos, and onions."

Denne shrugged. "The woman's got to learn to calm down."

This time, Eddie was the one who raised his eyebrows. He picked up the catsup and proceeded to pour it all over his food. "I got one more thing to tell you about them pelts," he said. "The latest person who's come to inquire about them is Maria Selvado. She's been after Taylor since the first of December, and she's got the Marine Science Center behind her. Guess they're doing some sort of seal study or something, and the pelts would be really useful. They're even offering to pay him. But he won't meet with her. She says she's not leaving until he does."

"Our Miss Selvado gets around," Lucy said.

"Yeah," Eddie said. "She even went up to his house on the Dee. Got real mad when she saw how he's displaying the pelts. Guess he's got them in one of those wall-sized glass cases beside his fireplace. He came to the door and she was yelling something about pins ruining the fur, or something. Anyway, he threw her off the porch, damn near landed her in the river. She hasn't been up there since."

"But there was a break-in," Retsler said.

"Thwarted break-in," Lucy said. "The alarm kicked on with the sirens and all the lights, remember?"

"And tiny footprints, woman-sized, in the mud beside the window on the fireplace side of the house."

Passionate woman," Retsler said.

"Mystery woman," Denne said. "She called me, asking if she could have the pup's body when I was through with it, said she wanted it for the Science Center. I offered to drive it over there for her -- I mean, who wants a corpse in your car if you can help it? -- and she turned me down. That made me suspicious, so I called the Science Center."

"And they'd never heard of her," Lucy said, her eyes sparkling as they always did when the story started getting juicy.

"Oh, they'd heard of her all right. But she hadn't worked for them for six months. Seems that she broke into the Oregon Coast Aquarium last summer, and was going to liberate the seals. Security stopped her before she made it to the outdoor pen, but the Aquarium offered not to press charges -- which would have embarrassed the Science Center -- if she promised to leave Newport. She did."

"And came here?" Retsler asked. "That seems odd to me. We're not that far from Newport."

Denne nodded. "The Science Center is none too happy that she's still representing herself as part of their staff. Not that she was ever staff-staff anyway. She was one of the student projects, interns or whatever, that they get coming through. But they still don't want their name connected to hers."

"And they have no interest in the seal pelts?" Retsler asked.

"None," Denne said.

Lucy nodded. "Selkies," she said.

All three of them turned to her. She grinned and shrugged. "Come on," she said. "We have no secrets between us. We are talking Whale Rock, aren't we?"

"Silkies?" Eddie asked.

"Selkies," Retsler said. He'd been boning up on his sea-faring lore since the last strange encounter. "They look like seals in the sea, but when they come on shore and shed their skin, they look human."

"Oh, God," Eddie said.

"But don't they usually come looking for love?" Denne asked. "Aren't they supposed to mate with human women, leave them pregnant, and return to the sea?"

"You've been reading too many Celtic stories," Lucy said. "That may have been true hundreds of years ago. But I think Selkies are more sophisticated than that."

"Sophisticated?" Denne placed his chin on the palm of his hand and looked at her. "Do you mean they're sending their children ashore in search of a better education?"

"You may mock me, young man, but think about it. What better way to find out about the things that threaten your people than to study those things?"

Retsler was silent. A lot threatened the seal population, which had been thinning in recent years. Some blamed oil spills farther up the coast, others blamed changes in commercial fishing laws, and still others blamed things like tourists taking pups off the beaches. Whatever the cause, there were fewer seals in the last few years than there had been in a long time.

"That seal pup," Denne said, "was 100% seal. There was nothing magical about it."

"The myths say that the smaller seals -- like the common seal -- belong entirely to the animal world, but the larger seals, like the gray, the great, and the crested, can be selkie folk." Lucy pushed her plate aside. "How else do you explain the clean, unrotted pelts, found among all that shiny stuff, as Eddie calls it. It was a nest, a place to hide wealth that enabled them to trade in Whale Rock."

Retsler put aside the remains of his fish and chips. "So?" he asked. "We have a bunch of selkies in human form walking around Whale Rock?"

"Or in the sea without their pelts. It's probably hazardous to their health." Lucy shook her head. "A year's a long time."

"What does this have to do with our dead pup?" Denne asked.

"Maybe nothing," Lucy said, "but selkies do have a kinship with seals. They're probably not happy about this."

"You think Maria Selvado is a selkie?" Retsler asked.

"I didn't say that." Lucy sniffed loudly. Of course she hadn't said that. She had implied it, like she often did, and Retsler could ignore her at his own peril.

"Selkies," Denne mused. "I thought selkies were dangerous."

"Only if you're a man in lust," Retsler said.

"No," Lucy said. "They are dangerous, if you kill one."

"What?" Eddie asked, setting down the long neck. "All the other selkies toss their pelts at you?"

"No," Lucy said. "If you kill one, don't get its blood in the ocean."

"Or?" Denne asked.

"Or a storm'll come up the likes of which you've never seen."

Retsler sighed. "Do you actually believe that, Lucy?"

She met his gaze. There was no twinkle in her gray eyes. "I've seen a lot of things, Dan. I don't disbelieve anything."

"But you don't actually believe it."

"Let me put it this way," Lucy said. "That myth is not one I'd want to test."

\* \* \* \*

"The language is plain, Retsler." Roman Taylor was a large man, made to seem even larger by the low ceilings in the second story of his riverside home. He hunched over a rough-hewn log table, made to match the rough edges on the outer walls. The inner walls were smooth and painted white. It was on one of those that huge case with the pelts gleamed in the morning sunshine. "I bought the Sandcastle Motel and all its contents. The pelts and the treasures in that room around them were inside the Sandcastle. No one disputes that."

Retsler stared at the deed before him. Apparently he stared too long because Taylor shifted from one foot to another.



The language was clear. Taylor did own the pelts and there was nothing Retsler could do about it.

"Maybe you should show this to city attorney," Taylor said. "Then maybe people'll leave me alone."

"They'll leave you alone now," Retsler said. "Sorry to bother you."

Taylor nodded once at the apology. Then he glanced at the case. "That woman's crazy, you know. If I could find a way to get her out of my motel I would. If you could think of something, I'd be forever in your debt."

"Has she broken any laws, Mr. Taylor?"

"I'd be the first to scream if she did." He walked over to the case. "She says the seals that had these pelts are still alive, and they need them. Isn't that nuts? You can't skin an animal like this and have the animal live."

"Can I see one?" Retsler asked.

Taylor opened the case. The glass swung open, and the scent of fur and an animal musk filled the room. "Come here."

Retsler obliged. The pelts glistened as if they were still wet, but there was a dullness that was starting to appear around their edges.

Taylor picked up a corner of the nearest fur. "See that?" he asked. "Best work I've ever seen. Not a trace of flesh, no knife marks. Just the fur. Isn't it beautiful?"

Beautiful wasn't a word that Retsler would have used, but he nodded anyway.

"Hey, Dad!"

Both men turned. A teenage boy stood in the stairwell, face flushing when he saw Retsler.

"Didn't know you had company," the boy said.

"The chief's just leaving."

The boy grunted. He stood perfectly still as if movement weren't allowed. "Why're you showing him the pelts?"

Something in the question made Retsler look at the boy. The boy's eyes were bright, almost too bright. And cold. So cold that Retsler felt a chill run through him.

"He'd heard about them, that's all," Taylor said.

"Dad thinks those pelts are the real thing," the boy said, his chin raised in something of a challenge.

Retsler became completely still. "You don't?"

"I think they're fake. I think he should get them checked."

"Why?" Retsler asked.

"Because I don't care how good you are, you can't remove a pelt making a single cut."

"Hmm," Retsler said. "Have you tried?"

"He hunts with me sometimes," Taylor said too fast. "Don't you, Michael?"

"We've never hunted together in our lives. My father never pays attention to me." The boy tilted his head, eyeing Retsler speculatively. "You ever spend New Year's Eve on the beach, chief?"

Retsler didn't answer. Taylor's face flushed.

"It's amazing what people'll burn -- "

"Michael!" Taylor said.

The boy grinned and shrugged, as if he had just been making conversation. "Nice seeing you. \_Chief\_."

And then he walked down the stairs. Retsler's entire body had turned numb. He had expected a teenager, but not one that would challenge him. Although he had heard stories about Michael Taylor for the last year. A teacher at the high school had asked how to deal with a boy who seemed to love violence. A female student filed a complaint, only to withdraw it a day later.

Retsler debated for a moment whether or not he should follow, whether or not he should search the boy's room, and then decided the boy wouldn't issue a challenge like that if he expected to get caught. Better to take it slow, build a case the right way. Maybe Retsler could even talk to Taylor, convince him to send the boy to a hospital where he could get help.

"Sorry about that," Taylor was saying. "He's at that age when no adult is worth his time."

Retsler stared at him. Taylor's flush deepened. "You know we found a skinned pup on the beach New Year's Day."

"No," Taylor said. "I hadn't. It's amazing what people will do."

"Isn't it?" Retsler asked. He looked at the case again. "How many of these did you find?"

"Twenty," Taylor said. "And that's how many are there."

Retsler silently counted to himself. Twenty. If the other pelt were here, it was somewhere else. "Maybe I should take a peek at your son's room."

"Not without a warrant," Taylor said.

Retsler nodded. It played out just as he expected. He shrugged, like the boy had, then he thanked Taylor for his time, and left the house.

The river was low here, sixty feet down the bank, and sparkling in the bright sunshine. Taylor had bought the land and built the house the year before he had bought the Sandcastle. Lucy said that Taylor had spent that year getting on the good side of the Planning Commission. Lucy would know.

The pelts were disturbing, the boy more so. But Taylor had a legal right to the pelts, and Retsler would have to work hard to make anything more than a misdemeanor stick on the boy. Taylor had more money than God, which meant that he could afford the biggest lawyers in the country.

Retsler was suddenly walking into the big leagues, and he wasn't even sure he wanted to play the game.

\* \* \* \*

The State Crime Lab could find no match on the fingerprints, nor did they have anything to say about the

requests from Whale Rock. They apologized profusely, but perfunctorily, and probably, when they got off the phone, chuckled at the things that passed for important in small towns.

Retsler didn't care. He had other things to check. Lucy had called Seavy County Deeds and Records, and had found the date of Taylor's home purchase. It was one month before the animal mutilations started near Hoover Bay. Now she was checking with the local police department in Taylor's previous home in San Jose, hoping to find another pattern.

It wasn't much, but it was a start. He also had a call in to an old friend at the FBI who might have a few ideas on how to proceed in a case as delicate, and insubstantial, as this one. Animal deaths and mutilations were bad enough, but, truth be told, they weren't what Retsler was really worried about. What worried him the most were the coldness of that boy's eyes, and the possibility -- make that the probability -- of what the boy would become.

Retsler had all that on his mind as he drove to the Sandcastle. He wasn't sure why he wanted to see Maria Selvado, but he knew he probably should.

Her room was on the top floor of the Sandcastle Motel. Like all of the rooms, it had double glass doors on the ocean side that opened onto an extra long balcony. When she led Retsler onto it, it made him feel as if he were standing over the water. He supposed, in high tide, that he would be. The balconies hung over the concrete breaker that protected the hotel from high surf -- another illegal measure grandfathered in by the Planning Commission. Retsler had hated the look from the ground, but he had to admit that, from the balconies themselves, the view was spectacular.

Selvado had let him in, no questions asked. That she had been in her room on such a beautiful afternoon, neither of them mentioned. The room itself was spectacular. The door opened into a hallway which led to a large bathroom, passed a king-sized bedroom, and opened into a well-apportioned sitting room filled with antiques and facing a marble fireplace. The ubiquitous television was hidden in a wall unit that still looked suspiciously out of place. It was also covered with dust.

The ocean breeze had a trace of mist. Selvado raised her face to it as if it gave her life. She was obviously waiting for him to speak.

He cleared his throat. "I spoke to Roman Taylor today about the pelts."

She turned, stunned.

"He showed me the deed. They're clearly his."

"They have nothing to do with him," she said fiercely. "They don't belong to him."

"By law they do."

She bit her lip and turned away. "The law is wrong."

"The law is what we have, Ms. Selvado. It may not be right all the time, it may not make things easy, but it's what we have."

She shook her head. "It's not enough."

He knew that. He leaned on the balcony railing, and dangled his arms over the edge. This next part he did partly because he knew he had made her angry, and he agreed with Taylor: she had to leave Whale Rock. She was too unpredictable. Retsler was afraid she would try to break into Taylor's house again. If she got near that teenage boy, her own life might be in danger.

"I've also learned that you're presenting yourself as an employee of the Marine Science Center, and asking for privileges due to your position."

"I am -- "

"You were," he said. "I found out about the dismissal. You're bordering on fraud, Ms. Selvado. I'll look at your actions as a simple misunderstanding right now, but any more of it, and I'll have to inform the Newport police."

She whirled toward him, her liquid eyes full of fire. There was a power to her, like the sea the day before a storm. "You wouldn't."

"I have to, Ms. Selvado."

"Taylor put you up to this."

"No." Retsler sighed. He would give her this next because he had to give her something, and then he would ask her to leave. "I'm dealing with Taylor in my own fashion. I'm trying to make a case against his son. I'm pretty sure the boy is the one who slaughtered that pup."

"Pretty sure?"

He held out his hands. "Meaning I'm convinced the boy's the one we want. I simply have to prove it. So if you'll leave me to my work, maybe I'll be able to help you."

"Bargain the boy's freedom for the pelts?"

"No," Retsler said. "I think the boy's too dangerous for that."

"Then what?"

"I'm not sure yet," he said, and felt the emptiness of his promise. "But I'll do the best I can."

"By asking me to leave town?" she asked.

"It's a start," he said.

"For you perhaps." Then she paused. The ocean was a deep clear blue. The sunshine this early in January was unusual, and welcome. She stared at it as if it gave her an idea. "And maybe for me as well."

\* \* \* \*

The next morning brought a spate of strange calls: boats all over the coastline and up the river had been damaged, not badly enough to ruin them, but enough to prevent anyone from going on the ocean that day. At a dock near Hoover Village, one old fisherman claimed he saw a group of seals nudging a hole in the hull of his boat, then moving to his neighbor's boat at the next mooring. Retsler had to call his entire staff in to meet the workload of examining each and every boat, and Lucy had the volunteer firemen help as well.

Retsler was so busy, he missed what later turned out to be the most important calls of the day.

Hotel patrons of the Sandcastle lit up the emergency lines with a gruesome tale: a dark-haired woman, bleeding from both arms, dove off her balcony into the sea.

When Retsler finally got the page, he knew at once who had died. Maria Selvado. And he had felt a chill.

He went over to the Sandcastle, and demanded to be let into her room.

The door was locked from the inside. A bloody knife sat on the back of the toilet. The bathroom floor was covered with blood. The trail led to the balcony. There was only one set of footprints -- women's size six, flat footed (no arch) with webs between the toes. They ended at the railing, although there were bloody handprints on the iron, and another splotch of blood on the top of the concrete breaker.

The body below was gone, taken by the rising tide, returned to the sea.

On the fireplace mantel was a note address to Retsler. It said, simply: \_When the laws of man fail, we rely on the laws of God.\_ And it was signed with an M.

\* \* \* \*

The storm came an hour later, at high tide. Intense and furious, it concentrated on Hoover Bay, the Dee River, and Whale Rock. The rest of the coast had delicious sun and a perfect January day. In Whale Rock, sustained winds of 100 miles per hour ripped the roof off a gas station, tore down several signs, and knocked out power to half the town. Waves crossed the concrete breaker and smashed into the Sandcastle Motel, destroying it as if it were made of paper.

Retsler had ordered an emergency evacuation of all low-lying areas, even though the National Weather Service swore that the satellite pictures showed no storm system in the vicinity. He had the radio and t.v. stations broadcast warnings, ordering everyone to high ground, to places that could survive winds, to places of safety. And because he was trusted, the town listened.

Someone later said that the storm would have caused a lot more destruction if it weren't for Retsler's clear thinking. Later they would call him a hero because he had saved hundreds of lives. That only two were lost in a freak storm, the governor would say, was miraculous. But Retsler knew better. He knew, the moment he saw the blood, how he had failed.

\* \* \* \*

Denne stood, a shadow in the growing darkness. He picked up the MacDonald's bag and shoved his styrofoam cup into it. Then he walked around the boat to Retsler.

"You've ruined those clothes," Retsler said, avoiding, knowing that he was avoiding. He shut off his flashlight, listening to the calm ocean in the distance, the gurgle of the river behind him. In the darkness, the cloying stink of the mud was almost overpowering. "The wife'll be mad."

"The wife isn't entitled to an opinion any more," Denne said. "New Year's resolution."

"You can't stop a woman from having an opinion."

"You can when you move out." Denne turned on his own flashlight. The beam illuminated the mud before them, and the footprints that led up to the Taylor's log house. He put a hand on Retsler's back. "You can't avoid this forever, Danny."

"I'm no sure I want to see this in the dark."

"It won't be any better in the light."

Denne led the way down the path that, twenty-four hours before, had been covered with greenery and winter flowers. He mounted the stairs to the main level.

The windows were gone, the door off its hinges. The water damage was so severe that the rough-hewn logs looked as if they'd been polished smooth.

Denne ducked inside. He shown a light toward the fireplace. It took a moment for Retsler's eyes to adjust. The light was reflecting off the glass on the case. He stepped away from the beam and peered inside.

Roman Taylor had been crammed into the square space, his arms and legs held in place by some wickedly tight knots. It didn't take a degree in forensic medicine to know that the man had been alive when he had been tied down. The water mark was two inches below the ceiling, and there was mud in the bottom of the case.

Mercifully, Denne moved the light. Retsler didn't use his.

"I'll photograph all of this tomorrow," Denne said.

"There's no need," Retsler said. "He drowned."

Denne looked sharply at him.

Retsler shrugged. "Who am I going to charge?"

"You might want to wait until you see the rest." Denne led him down the stairs into the daylight basement. In the corner, someone had stuck a log into the floor. It looked like one of the mooring posts that littered the river. Onto it, Taylor's son Michael -- or what was left of him -- stared balefully at them.

Retsler swallowed hard to keep down the bile. He recognized the position -- recognized everything, in fact, right down to the expression on Michael's face.

The dog. That was how they had found the dog.

Denne raised his flashlight beam. It caught on a knife stuck into the pole. The knife was serrated and used for gutting animals. The handle was ivory, and engraved on it, was this: Michael Taylor. Happy 13th Birthday. Love, Dad.

"Is it our knife?" Retsler asked.

"No doubt about it," Denne said.

Retsler closed his eyes. He would have had the proof he needed after all. Damn him for talking to Selvado. Damn him and his worries about a conviction. Damn him, and the lack of respect he had for his own abilities.

"Of course," Denne said slowly, "any good lawyer could make hash of a case based on one single knife."

"Really?" Retsler asked.

"I think so," Denne said. He took one more glance at the body. "And I don't think I was alone in that belief."

"Millions of dollars in damage," Retsler said. "Lives ruined. Two deaths. Because of me and my mouth."

"You didn't start this," Denne said.

"But I should have ended it," Retsler said. He sighed and sloshed his way back to the stairs. "Next time, I

trust Lucy."

"Next time?" Denne asked, following him. "Let's hope to God there is no next time."

But there would be, Retsler knew. As long as Whale Rock was here, as long as strange things happened, there would be another clash between the humans and the strange creatures that lived in the sea. He only hoped that the next time, he would try some cooperation, maybe learn how to bend the laws of man, so that no one had to rely on the laws of God.